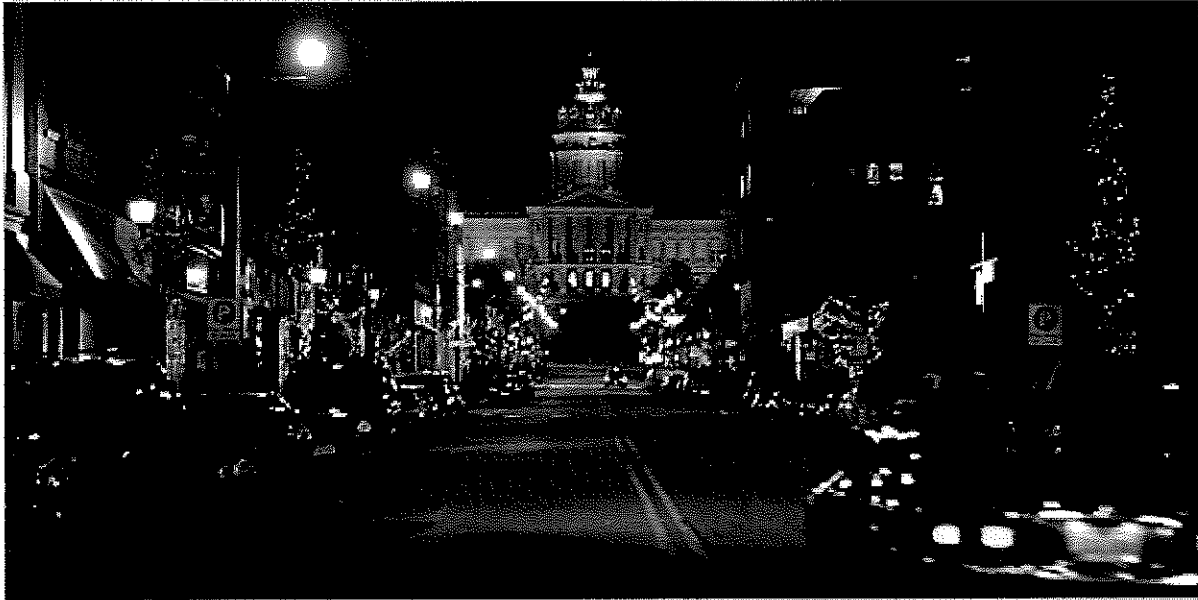


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JOURNEYS | DES MOINES

## In the Spotlight, Ready for Its Close-Up



Eric Thayer for The New York Times

The newly vibrant neighborhood of the East Village, an area with restaurants, boutiques and bookstores near the Iowa State Capitol.

By [ADAM NAGOURNEY](#)

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### Link to Iowa Travel Guide

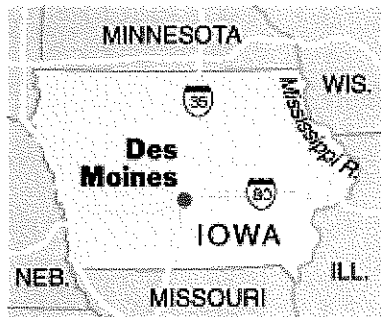
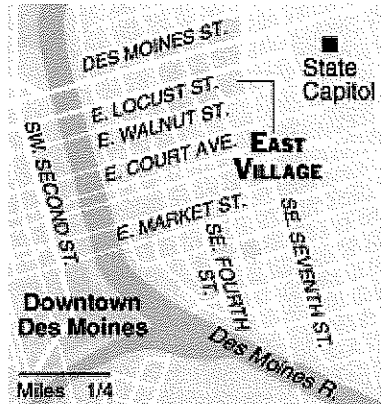
THERE was a time when being told that I would be spending New Year's Eve in Des Moines would have, well, sobered me up in a New York minute.

But the [Iowa](#) presidential caucuses are being held on Jan. 3, so it looks as if I will indeed be spending New Year's Eve in Des Moines. And that does not bother me at all. In fact, I'm rather looking forward to it.

It was not long ago, as most Iowans will tell you, when East Coast stereotypes about this Midwest city were fairly accurate. Bleak and foreboding, a city with a desultory and desolate downtown, few places to eat and little to do once the candidates returned to often dreary hotel rooms. For the hordes of campaign staff members, reporters, television crews who have encamped here for the caucuses over the past 30 years — great story, yes, but suffice it to say that Des Moines wasn't the draw.

But the other night in Des Moines, I had dinner with a colleague and the Iowa state director of [Hillary Clinton](#)'s presidential campaign at a vibrant restaurant, Lucca, in the heart of a gentrified neighborhood called the East Village. The restaurant had more panache and better food than many places I've eaten in [Washington](#), D.C. The East Village streets, spread out under the State Capitol, were aglow with lights — lavender, icy blue and, of course, red and green — strung out for Christmas. They were bustling with boutiques, bookstores, coffee shops, culinary stores and Smash, an edgy T-shirt shop where the proprietors were listening to Band of Horses while making slightly off-color T-shirts celebrating the Iowa caucuses.

A walk back across the Des Moines River offered a glimpse at the illuminated Beaux-Arts municipal buildings that line the riverfront. Downriver was Principal Park, a handsome Triple A ballpark for the Chicago Cubs farm team; the abandoned buildings that once surrounded the ballpark have been converted into condominiums. Downtown, the Kirkwood Corner, a legendary greasy spoon, is now a sushi restaurant. And — get this — the Rockettes are coming to town later this month for what is being advertised as their first performance in Des Moines.



The New York Times

I'm not sure I would go so far as to say that Des Moines has become a vacation destination. But it has most certainly become cool. More than that, if you have any desire to witness presidential candidates in the most close-up and intimate of settings, there is arguably no place better to go than Des Moines. If the city itself was once a reason not to come, it has now in fact become an added draw.

It is a change that has crept up on people who live here and comes as a surprise to the occasional visitors. That struck me a few weeks ago when I found myself responding with mild irritation — O.K., defensively — to what sounded to my ears like a hint of condescension to this city from the planeloads of Washingtonians who had arrived for a Democratic gala known as the Jefferson Jackson Dinner. It wasn't snobbery so much as they assumed they were visiting the Des Moines of 1984.

"I had an old college friend of mine who grew up in Des Moines and moved away; she was back last week and she was going on and on about the changes she had seen here," said David Yepsen, the renowned political columnist for The Des Moines Register who has lived in Des Moines for 33 years. "This whole thing in the East Village, which didn't exist 10 years ago; that area, it was a classic grimy neighborhood, with a couple of lofts and gay bars. And now it's wonderful and funky."

The changes are evident as soon as you come upon downtown. What were once blocks of rundown buildings and abandoned auto dealerships have been transformed into a five-block landscape of green

parkland. The city — acutely aware of its image, particularly in a presidential election year — was freshening up the flower boxes in the unseasonably warm late November.

The park is the gateway to one of the more striking works of architecture in any medium-sized American city: the Des Moines Central Library, designed by the London architect David Chipperfield. It is a two-story, 110,000-square-foot building sheathed in glass reinforced by copper mesh, which gives the building a beguiling glow and offers a warm anchor to downtown.

It is next door to the Temple for Performing Arts, an ornate Masonic temple built in 1913 that was in danger of being torn down before it was taken over by a local real estate developer, Harry Bookey. He converted it into a recital hall (itself worth a tour) and placed a restaurant, Centro, on the ground floor.

But the real reason to come to Iowa's capital is for the politics. On any given day, you can see a presidential hopeful taking questions at a town hall meeting, talking to reporters on a street corner or giving a speech. These are not closed events, and — don't worry — no one is going to demand proof of residency.

The Des Moines Register publishes a daily schedule of events across the state. With a map and a little planning, it is easy to catch three or four candidates a day. In the space of two days a few weeks ago, I was able to see Hillary Rodham Clinton, John Edwards, Barack Obama, Mitt Romney, John McCain and Joe Biden. This requires a considerable amount of driving — Iowa is a big state, and two-hour drives through harvested cornfields are the norm. Get a navigational system, and watch your speed: the State Patrol does a brisk business handing out tickets this time of year.

Particularly when there are a lot of candidates in town, Des Moines can feel like one big political party. Mr. Obama's headquarters is smack in the heart of the East Village, and his campaign workers stream in and out all day. Mike Huckabee's headquarters is typically open late into the evening ; you can peer through the plate-glass windows and see Mr. Huckabee's Iowa state director hard at work. Do not be surprised to sit down in a restaurant and see Mrs. Clinton across the dining room, or to spot Mr. Romney jogging on the treadmill at the Marriott Hotel.

There have historically been a few places to go if you are into political celebrity-spotting (and now we are addressing the real groupies out there, those of you who get excited at spotting David Broder or Candy Crowley): Centro for one, but also 801 Steak and Chop House — a classic Iowa steakhouse with New York prices — and, late at night, the bar at the Hotel Fort Des Moines.

But these were places to go less for the food and more for the experience. In this new Des Moines, there are easily a half-dozen places you can go for the food. Lucca is certainly one, as well as Azalea, an American restaurant with soaring ceilings and an open kitchen tucked into the lobby of one of the city's historic buildings. So before I left town the other day, I stopped in at one of them — sorry, I'm not divulging which one — and snagged a Dec. 31 dinner reservation before it was too late. I never thought I would say this, but believe me: Des Moines is going to be jumping this New Year's Eve.

*ADAM NAGOURNEY, the chief political correspondent for The New York Times, has been covering presidential campaigns since 1988.*